

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 17-1744V

AUSTIN ROACH-YOHEY, as representative
of ESTATE OF ANGELA ROACH,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

UNPUBLISHED

Special Master Katherine E. Oler

Filed: March 4, 2022

Interim Attorneys' Fees and Costs

Sean Greenwood, Greenwood Law Firm, Houston, TX, for Petitioner.

Madelyn Weeks, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., for Respondent.

DECISION ON MOTION FOR INTERIM ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

On November 7, 2017, Angela Roach (former Petitioner) filed for compensation in the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program ("the Vaccine Program"),² alleging that she developed Guillain-Barré syndrome as a result of the flu vaccination she received on December 6, 2016. Pet. at 1, ECF No. 1. Ms. Roach passed away on June 23, 2021. Ex. 48. Mr. Austin Roach-Yohey (current Petitioner), son of Ms. Roach, became administrator of Ms. Roach's estate on September 20, 2021. Ex. 48. I granted the motion to amend the case caption on October 8, 2021.

¹ This Decision will be posted on the Court of Federal Claims' website. **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** As provided by 42 U.S.C. § 300aa-12(d)(4)(B), however, the parties may object to the Decision's inclusion of certain kinds of confidential information. Specifically, under Vaccine Rule 18(b), each party has fourteen days within which to request redaction "of any information furnished by that party: (1) that is a trade secret or commercial or financial in substance and is privileged or confidential; or (2) that includes medical files or similar files, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy." Vaccine Rule 18(b). If, upon review, I agree that the identified materials fit within this definition, I will redact such material from public access. Otherwise, the Decision in its present form will be available. *Id.*

² The Vaccine Program comprises Part 2 of the National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3758, codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §§ 300aa-10 through 34 (2012) ("Vaccine Act" or "the Act"). Individual section references hereafter will be to § 300aa of the Act (but will omit that statutory prefix).

ECF No. 68.

Petitioner filed a Motion for Interim Attorneys' Fees and Costs on June 9, 2021, requesting \$37,211.50 in interim fees and costs. Fees App., ECF No. 59. On June 23, 2021, Respondent filed a response stating it is within my discretion to award interim attorneys' fees and costs. Fees Resp. at 2, ECF No. 61.

For the reasons discussed below, I hereby **GRANT IN PART** Petitioner's application and award a total of **\$35,655.40** in interim attorneys' fees and costs.

I. Legal Standard

A. Interim Attorneys' Fees and Costs

The Federal Circuit has held that an award of interim attorneys' fees and costs is permissible under the Vaccine Act. *Shaw v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 609 F.3d 1372 (Fed. Cir. 2010); *Avera v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 515 F.3d 1343 (Fed. Cir. 2008). In *Cloer*, the Federal Circuit noted that "Congress [has] made clear that denying interim attorneys' fees under the Vaccine Act is contrary to an underlying purpose of the Vaccine Act." *Cloer v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 675 F.3d 1358, 1361-62 (Fed. Cir. 2012).

In *Avera*, the Federal Circuit stated, "[i]nterim fees are particularly appropriate in cases where proceedings are protracted, and costly experts must be retained." *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1352. Likewise, in *Shaw*, the Federal Circuit held that "where the claimant establishes that the cost of litigation has imposed an undue hardship and there exists a good faith basis for the claim, it is proper for the special master to award interim attorneys' fees." 609 F.3d at 1375. *Avera* did not, however, define when interim fees are appropriate; rather, it has been interpreted to allow special masters discretion. *See Avera*, 515 F.3d; *Kirk v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 08-241V, 2009 WL 775396, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Mar. 13, 2009); *Bear v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 11-362V, 2013 WL 691963, at *4 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Feb. 4, 2013). Even though it has been argued that a petitioner must meet the three *Avera* criteria -- protracted proceedings, costly expert testimony, and undue hardship -- special masters have instead treated these criteria as possible factors in a flexible balancing test. *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1352; *see Al-Uffi v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 13-956V, 2015 WL 6181669, at *7 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 30, 2015).

A petitioner is eligible for an interim award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs if the special master finds that a petitioner has brought her petition in good faith and with a reasonable basis. §15(e)(1); *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1352; *Shaw*, 609 F.3d at 1372; *Woods v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 105 Fed. Cl. 148 (2012), at 154; *Friedman v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 94 Fed. Cl. 323, 334 (2010); *Doe 21 v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 89 Fed. Cl. 661, 668 (2009); *Bear*, 2013 WL 691963, at *5; *Lumsden v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 97-588V, 2012 WL 1450520, at *4 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Mar. 28, 2012). The undue hardship inquiry looks at more than just financial involvement of a petitioner; it also looks at any money expended by a petitioner's counsel. *Kirk*, 2009 WL 775396, at *2. Referring to *Avera*, former Chief Special

Master Golkiewicz in *Kirk* found that “the general principle underlying an award of interim fees [is] clear: avoid working a substantial financial hardship on petitioners and their counsel.” *Id.*

B. Good Faith

The good faith requirement is met through a subjective inquiry. *Di Roma v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 90-3277V, 1993 WL 496981, at *1 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Nov. 18, 1993). Such a requirement is a “subjective standard that focuses upon whether [P]etitioner honestly believed he had a legitimate claim for compensation.” *Turner v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-544V, 2007 WL 4410030, at *5 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Nov. 30, 2007). Without evidence of bad faith, “petitioners are entitled to a presumption of good faith.” *Grice v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 36 Fed. Cl. 114, 121 (1996). Thus, so long as Petitioner had an honest belief that her claim could succeed, the good faith requirement is satisfied. *See Riley v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 09-276V, 2011 WL 2036976, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 29, 2011) (citing *Di Roma*, 1993 WL 496981, at *1); *Turner*, 2007 WL 4410030, at *5.

C. Reasonable Basis

Unlike the good-faith inquiry, an analysis of reasonable basis requires more than just a petitioner’s belief in her claim. *Turner*, 2007 WL 4410030, at *6-7. Instead, the claim must at least be supported by objective evidence -- medical records or medical opinion. *Sharp-Roundtree v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 14-804V, 2015 WL 12600336, at *3 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Nov. 3, 2015).

While the statute does not define the quantum of proof needed to establish reasonable basis, it is “something less than the preponderant evidence ultimately required to prevail on one’s vaccine-injury claim.” *Chuisano v. United States*, 116 Fed. Cl. 276, 283 (2014). The Court of Federal Claims affirmed in *Chuisano* that “[a]t the most basic level, a petitioner who submits no evidence would not be found to have reasonable basis...” *Id.* at 286. The Court in *Chuisano* found that a petition which relies on temporal proximity and a petitioner’s affidavit is not sufficient to establish reasonable basis. *Id.* at 290; *see also Turpin v. Sec’y Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-564V, 2005 WL 1026714, *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Feb. 10, 2005) (finding no reasonable basis when petitioner submitted an affidavit and no other records); *Brown v. Sec’y Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-539V, 2005 WL 1026713, *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Mar. 11, 2005) (finding no reasonable basis when petitioner presented only e-mails between her and her attorney). The Federal Circuit has affirmed that “more than a mere scintilla but less than a preponderance of proof could provide sufficient grounds for a special master to find reasonable basis.” *Cottingham v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 2019-1596, 971 F.3d 1337, 1346 (Fed. Cir. Aug. 19, 2020) (finding Petitioner submitted objective evidence supporting causation when she submitted medical records and a vaccine package insert); *see also James-Cornelius v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 984 F.3d 1374, 1380 (Fed. Cir. 2021) (finding that “the lack of an express medical opinion on causation did not by itself negate the claim’s reasonable basis.”).

Temporal proximity between vaccination and onset of symptoms is a necessary component in establishing causation in non-Table cases, but without more, temporal proximity alone “fails to establish a reasonable basis for a vaccine claim.” *Chuisano*, 116 Fed. Cl. at 291.

The Federal Circuit has stated that reasonable basis “is an objective inquiry” and concluded that “counsel may not use [an] impending statute of limitations deadline to establish a reasonable basis for [appellant’s] claim.” *Simmons v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 875 F.3d 632, 636 (Fed. Cir. 2017). Further, an impending statute of limitations should not even be one of several factors the special master considers in her reasonable basis analysis. “[T]he Federal Circuit forbade, altogether, the consideration of statutory limitations deadlines—and all conduct of counsel—in determining whether there was a reasonable basis for a claim.” *Amankwaa v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 138 Fed. Cl. 282, 289 (2018).

“[I]n deciding reasonable basis the [s]pecial [m]aster needs to focus on the requirements for a petition under the Vaccine Act to determine if the elements have been asserted with sufficient evidence to make a feasible claim for recovery.” *Santacroce v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 15-555V, 2018 WL 405121, at *7 (Fed. Cl. Jan. 5, 2018). Special masters cannot award compensation “based on the claims of petitioner alone, unsubstantiated by medical records or by medical opinion.” 42 U.S.C. § 300aa-13(a)(1). Special masters and judges of the Court of Federal Claims have interpreted this provision to mean that petitioners must submit medical records or expert medical opinion in support of causation-in-fact claims. *See Waterman v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 123 Fed. Cl. 564, 574 (2015) (citing *Dickerson v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 35 Fed. Cl. 593, 599 (1996) (stating that medical opinion evidence is required to support an on-Table theory where medical records fail to establish a Table injury)).

When determining if a reasonable basis exists, many special masters and judges consider a myriad of factors. The factors to be considered may include “the factual basis of the claim, the medical and scientific support for the claim, the novelty of the vaccine, and the novelty of the theory of causation.” *Amankwaa*, 138 Fed. Cl. at 289. This approach allows the special master to look at each application for attorneys’ fees and costs on a case-by-case basis. *Hamrick v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-683V, 2007 WL 4793152, at *4 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Nov. 19, 2007).

II. Discussion

A. Undue Financial Hardship

This case has been in litigation for nearly five years. Mr. Greenwood and his associates have expended over 100 hours on this case. Furthermore, counsel expended funds to hire Dr. Steinman, who has submitted four expert reports. *See* Exs. 15, 36, 41, 45. Respondent has not filed any opposition to this fees application, thus I find it reasonable to award interim fees and costs at this juncture to avoid undue financial hardship.

B. Good Faith and Reasonable Basis

Respondent has not raised any specific objection to the good faith or reasonable basis for this claim and leaves such a determination to my discretion. *See* Fees Resp. I find that the petition was filed in good faith.

As discussed above, the threshold for reasonable basis is a much lower standard than the burden to prove entitlement to compensation by preponderant evidence. In making a reasonable basis determination, I must look at a totality of circumstances, taking into account the factual basis for the claim, and the medical and scientific support offered. Dr. Lawrence Steinman, board-certified in pediatrics, neurology, and clinical neurophysiology, has submitted four expert reports, in which he has opined that the flu vaccination triggered Ms. Roach's GBS. *See* Exs. 15, 36, 41, 45. With the medical records and expert reports provided, such evidence is sufficient to justify the filing of this petition, thus I find the petition was filed with reasonable basis.

As there is no other reason to deny an award of interim attorneys' fees and costs, I will award Petitioner's reasonable fees and costs in this instance.

C. Attorneys' Fees

Petitioner requests \$29,044.10 in attorneys' fees. Fees App.

1. Reasonable Hourly Rate

A reasonable hourly rate is defined as the rate "prevailing in the community for similar services by lawyers of reasonably comparable skill, experience and reputation." *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1348 (quoting *Blum*, 465 U.S. at 896 n.11). In general, this rate is based on "the forum rate for the District of Columbia" rather than "the rate in the geographic area of the practice of [P]etitioner's attorney." *Rodriguez v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 632 F.3d 1381, 1384 (Fed. Cir. 2011) (citing *Avera*, 515 F. 3d at 1349).

McCulloch provides the framework for determining the appropriate compensation for attorneys' fees based upon the attorneys' experience. *See McCulloch v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 09–293V, 2015 WL 5634323 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015). The Office of Special Masters has accepted the decision in *McCulloch* and has issued a Fee Schedule for subsequent years.³

³ The 2015–2016 Fee Schedule can be accessed at:

<http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys-Forum-Rate-Fee-Schedule2015-2016.pdf>.

The 2017 Fee Schedule can be accessed at:

<http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys-Forum-Rate-Fee-Schedule-2017.pdf>.

The 2018 Fee Schedule can be accessed at:

<http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys%27%20Forum%20Rate%20Fee%20Schedule%202018.pdf>.

The 2019 Fee Schedule can be accessed at:

<http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys%27%20Forum%20Rate%20Fee%20Schedule%202019.pdf>.

The 2020 Fee Schedule can be accessed at:

http://www.uscfc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys%27%20Forum%20Rate%20Fee%20Schedule%202020.PPI_OL.pdf

The hourly rates contained within the schedules are updated from the decision in *McCulloch*, 2015 WL 5634323.

Mr. Greenwood requests to be compensated at an hourly rate of \$325.00 for 2017; \$337.00 for 2018; \$363.00 for 2019; \$400.00 for 2020; \$425.00 for 2021. Ex. 44 at 3. Ms. Kaleigh Smith also worked on this case and requests to be compensated at an hourly rate of \$150.00 for 2017; \$215.00 for 2018; \$225.00 for 2019; and \$250.00 for 2020. Ms. Carruth requests to be compensated at an hourly rate of \$180.00 for 2021. *Id.* Mr. Greenwood also requests compensation for a law clerk, at an hourly rate of \$110.00 for 2019 and Ms. Ward, a legal assistant, at an hourly rate of \$150.00 for 2019; \$160.00 for 2020; and \$170.00 for 2021. This request is consistent with what I and other special masters have previously awarded Mr. Greenwood, Ms. Smith, and Ms. Carruth. *See, e.g., Conley v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1458V, 2021 WL 3917016 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jul. 30, 2021); *Patterson v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 18-1583V, 2021 WL 3743837 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jul. 14, 2021); *Stillabower v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 17-265V, 2020 WL 619686 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 24, 2020). Ms. Ward’s hourly rate needs to be adjusted, as she was previously awarded \$125.00 for 2019 and \$140.00 for 2020 and will be awarded \$150.00 for 2021. *See, e.g., Conley v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1458V, 2021 WL 3917016 at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jul. 30, 2021). This results in a reduction of **\$59.50**.

2. Hours Reasonably Expended

Attorneys’ fees are awarded for the “number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation.” *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1348. Ultimately, it is “well within the Special Master’s discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done.” *Saxton ex rel. Saxton v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1522 (Fed. Cir. 1993). In exercising that discretion, special masters may reduce the number of hours submitted by a percentage of the amount charged. *See Broekelschen v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 728-29 (2011) (affirming the special master’s reduction of attorney and paralegal hours); *Guy v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 38 Fed. Cl. 403, 406 (1997) (affirming the special master’s reduction of attorney and paralegal hours). Petitioner bears the burden of establishing that the rates charged, hours expended, and costs incurred are reasonable. *Wasson v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1993). However, special masters may reduce awards *sua sponte*, independent of enumerated objections from the respondent. *Sabella v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 208-09 (Fed. Cl. 2009); *Savin v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 318 (Fed. Cl. 2008), *aff’d* No. 99-573V, 2008 WL 2066611 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 22, 2008). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner’s fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (Fed. Cl. 2011). Special masters may look to their experience and judgment to reduce an award of fees and costs to a level they find reasonable for the work performed. *Saxton v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cl. 1993). It is within a special master’s discretion to make a global reduction to the total amount of fees requested. *See Hines v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 22 Cl. Ct. 750, 753 (1991) (“special masters have “wide latitude in determining the reasonableness of both attorneys’ fees and costs”); *Hocraffer v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-533V, 2011 WL 3705153 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. July 25, 2011), *mot. for rev. denied*, 2011 WL 6292218, at *13 (Fed. Cl. 2011) (denying review of the special master’s decision and endorsing “a global – rather than line-by-line – approach to determine the reasonable number of hours expended in this case”).

While attorneys may be compensated for non-attorney-level work, the rate must be comparable to what would be paid for a paralegal or secretary. *See O’Neill v. Sec’y of Health &*

Hum. Servs., No. 08–243V, 2015 WL 2399211, at *9 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 28, 2015). Clerical and secretarial tasks should not be billed at all, regardless of who performs them. *See, e.g., McCulloch*, 2015 WL 5634323, at *26.

Petitioner’s counsel has provided a breakdown of hours billed. Ex. 42. I find the hours to be largely reasonable, but a small reduction is necessary due to excessive billing for collection of medical records and administrative tasks. Mr. Greenwood and his associates spent approximately 13 hours performing these tasks. These entries include (but are not limited to): “Corresponded with facility regarding outstanding records”, “Drafted Notice of Filing”, “Updated exhibit list”, “Filed Medical Records”, and “Prepare exhibits for filing.” These billing entries are both excessive and administrative in nature; administrative tasks are not compensated by the Program. Because most of these entries are performed at both attorney and paralegal rates, I will apply a 5% reduction to the total attorneys’ fees requested. I note that a total of over 130 hours were billed by Mr. Greenwood and his associates, thus 13 hours should have been 10% reduction. As this is the first recorded instance of excessive billing by Mr. Greenwood, I am only reducing fees by 5%. This results in a reduction of **\$1,452.20**.

Total fees to be awarded: **\$27,532.40**.

D. Reasonable Costs

Petitioner requests a total of \$8,137.40 in costs, which includes obtaining medical records, the Court’s filing fee, mailing costs, and Dr. Steinman’s expert fees. Fees App., Ex. 42 at 12.

1. Petitioner’s Expert Costs

Petitioner requests \$7,500.00 for 15 hours of work performed by Dr. Lawrence Steinman. Fees App., Ex. 43 at 11. Petitioner requests Dr. Steinman be compensated at an hourly rate of \$500.00. Dr. Steinman has previously been awarded his requested rates and I see no reason to disturb such a request. *See, e.g., Tullio v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 15-0051V, 2021 WL 5854057 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Nov. 10, 2021); *Cobb v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 17-1123V, 2020 WL 2466569 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 1, 2020); *Rolshoven v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 14-439V, 2017 WL 5472577 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Oct. 19, 2017). The amount of time Dr. Steinman spent was also reasonable thus I will grant his expert fees in full.

2. Other Miscellaneous Costs

I have reviewed Petitioner’s remaining costs totaling \$637.40, which include medical record requests, the Court’s filing fee, and mailing costs. *See* Fees App., Ex. 42 at 12. These costs are reasonable, however Petitioner failed to submit a receipt for the collection of records from Premier Physical Therapy (\$14.40). Petitioner can file the receipt in a future fees application for compensation.

Total costs to be awarded: **\$8,123.00**.

II. Conclusion

Accordingly, in the exercise of the discretion afforded to me in determining the propriety of interim fee and cost awards, and based on the foregoing, I **GRANT IN PART** Petitioner's application, as follows:

A lump sum in the amount of **\$35,655.40** representing reimbursement of Petitioner's interim attorneys' fees and costs in the form of a check jointly payable to Petitioner and his counsel Mr. Sean Greenwood.

In the absence of a motion for review filed pursuant to RCFC Appendix B, the Clerk of Court **SHALL ENTER JUDGMENT** in accordance with this decision.⁴

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/ Katherine E. Oler

Katherine E. Oler
Special Master

⁴ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), entry of judgment is expedited by the parties' joint filing of a notice renouncing the right to seek review.